Inn from the cold war

A SMALL TOWN IN GERMANY. By John le Carré. Coward-McCann. 383 pp. $6.95.

By Malcolm Muggeridge

Without any question John le Carré is an exceptionally gifted writer, as his fabulously successful *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, as well as the books that preceded it (*A Murder of Quality*, *Call for the Dead*), clearly indicated. There must therefore be some reason for the unsatisfactoriness of his latest novel other than the failure of his talent. I suspect that the explanation lies, at any rate partly, in the circumstances and consequences of his very success. This conclusion is based to some extent, I should explain, on a talk I had with him about his future as a writer some time after *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* had established itself as a super-best seller. Incidentally, Le Carré then revealed himself to be an unusually intelligent, modest and altogether agreeable person. I've run into him subsequently once or twice, always with pleasure.

First, *A Small Town in Germany*. It's about the disappearance from the British Embassy in Bonn of one of its minor officials along with some most-secret files, and the investigation which was subsequently undertaken by a security man sent out from London. Like Graham Greene (a writer who has much influenced him), Le Carré is adept at building up excitement, and manages to sustain one's interest in the rather flat-footed and indeterminate quest for the missing diplomat. Again like Greene, he is a dab hand at evoking shabbiness and shoddiness, and succeeds excellently in portraying the essential second-rateness of the diplomatic service of a country like Britain, nominally still a Great Power, actually a minor one. I enjoyed his Embassy interior very much.

The trouble is the story itself. It really is remarkably silly, recalling Dr. Johnson's remark about the plot of *Cymbeline* — that it defies criticism because it is impossible to criticize unresisting imbecility. We are expected to believe that a sort of pietistic Hitler has arisen in Germany who is about to recreate the 1939 situation, and that British policy is to make terms with him in order not to be excluded from the European Common Market. The missing man, as it turns out, has gone to ground to escape the German police who are after him because they know that he has information proving that the new Hitler is a war criminal. Perhaps the best comment was provided by events; the appearance of *A Small Town in Germany* has coincided with the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army and a nondescript satellite force which included a contingent from Dr. Ulbricht's East Germany under the command of an ex-Nazi General. Nothing I or anyone else could write about the book's plot could come anywhere near this for irony.

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Now to return to Le Carré himself, and his career as a novelist. Up to *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* he saw himself working away and becoming in a modest way a successful and reputable writer of historical novels. He would certainly have done much better than that; I see him as pulling off something comparable to Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. Then comes the fabulous success with a really brilliant book — which *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* undoubtedly is — and all the money, attention, proffered contracts, etc., etc. that went therewith. The result is he's stuck with writing books about embassies and spies because that was the formula which worked before. Hence *A Small Town in Germany*, in which, as it seems to me, the espionage theme — such as it is — is forced and unreal; in which the Cold War setting, so acutely conveyed in *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, has become theatrical, stale and artificial, and in which he involves himself in the infantile political and social notions of the Sorbonne rebels and their sympathizers.

It's really too bad that a talented writer like Le Carré should get stuck like this. Suppose, for instance, it had happened to Dickens, and he had been induced to go on writing the adventures of the Pickwick Club for the rest of his life! For a young writer — or, indeed, a young practitioner in any art — to become suddenly successful can be utterly disastrous as far as the development of his talent is concerned. I can think of ten or a dozen very promising contemporary writers (it would be invidious to mention their names) who have come to grief in this way. In our sort of society success is something that the vultures gather round as they do round the famous towers in Bombay where Parsi corpses are laid out to rot. The fact that the vultures carry check books in their beaks and are followed by a swarm of lesser scavenger birds in the shape of gossip writers, columnists, public relations men and so on, does not make them any less voracious and destructive than the Bombay ones. If anything, the reverse. I wish someone — Edmund Wilson would be the ideal person — would make a study in depth of the moral, spiritual and aesthetic consequences of success in the arts. There would be no lack of object lessons to draw on.